

A FAIR REBEL'S
INTERVIEWS WITH
ABRAHAM LINCOLN

To

Judge Daniel Fish
with the regards of

S. W. Jackson

Nov. 21. '97

[Jackson, S.W.]

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PORTRAIT OF LINCOLN, 1864

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A F A I R R E B E L ' S
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A B R A H A M L I N C O L N

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S.W.J.

FOREWORD

A HALF century after their occurrence, this brief account of my mother's two interviews with the great War President, is put in printed form as a keep-sake for members of the family and a few intimate friends.

The incidents recorded in these few pages serve to further illustrate the kindness of the much beloved Lincoln towards those in trouble, and his generous tolerance in granting a favor even to a rebel.

In my mother's own words I tell the story as I received it a short time since.

S. W. J.



INTERVIEWS WITH ABRAHAM LINCOLN

DURING Buchanan's administration, Francis P. Blair, Sr., had a country place in Maryland called "Silver Spring." George Beale and his family, who were intimate friends of ours, also had a place in Maryland called "Indian Spring," which adjoined, or nearly adjoined, the Blair place. I often visited the Beales as a girl, and it was through this association I knew Mr. Blair, who subsequently introduced me to Mr. Lincoln.

My only brother, Thomas H. Neilson, was at school preparing for the University of Virginia when the War broke out in 1861. As soon as Virginia seceded, he

joined the Confederate Army in Staunton, Va., under John D. Imboden. Communication between the North and South was cut off by blockade and picket guard. Occasionally the blockade was evaded by Confederates, and thus intelligence of Southern friends was received.

We learned that General Imboden's Command had been sent to join "Stonewall" Jackson's Brigade. I had not heard from my brother for eighteen months when "Stonewall" Jackson was defeated and report said his army was cut to pieces. Your grandmother was heartbroken lest her only son had been killed. I implored her to keep up courage as there were Confederate prisoners taken, and Tom might be among them. I suggested that I ask Mr. Blair to introduce me to the President

with the view of obtaining a pass to go through the Forts containing rebel prisoners. Mr. Blair willingly consented, provided I could get two Army officers to indorse me. This, fortunately, I was able to do. Colonel Samuel Bowman, a life-long friend of the family, and Colonel Roger Jones, were then stationed in Washington, and both agreed to do this.

I then wrote to Mr. Blair telling him that Colonel Bowman and Colonel Roger Jones would go with me, and asked him to arrange an interview with the President. This he readily did, and wrote me that such an interview had been granted. Soon after, I met Colonel Bowman in Philadelphia and we went to Washington, where we were joined by Roger Jones, and all four proceeded to the White House.

After quite a long wait we were ushered into the President's room. I well remember how small I felt before the tall, lank, angular figure of the President as he arose to receive us, but was immediately put at my ease by his most kindly manner.

He shook hands with all, then placing one hand behind him with the other in his trouser's pocket he listened attentively to what Mr. Blair said.—I omitted to state, that while waiting, Mr. Blair had said to me, "Mary, be very guarded in all you say;" and to Colonel Roger Jones, "You can not be too careful, as this is a serious undertaking." Then Colonel Bowman said, "Birdie, do not get excited and make a fool of yourself."—When Mr. Blair had finished, the President turned to me with a searching look from his deep set eyes, and

said, "You are loyal, of course?" I replied, "Yes, loyal to the heart's core—to Virginia." The President just seemed as if he was trying to look me through, withdrawing his hand from his pocket and stroking his chin, we both gazed steadily at each other a moment, then turning to his desk, he wrote a few lines, handed the paper to me, and bowed us out.

All three, Mr. Blair, Colonel Bowman and Colonel Roger Jones were infuriated with me. Colonel Roger Jones was so indignant that he rushed down Pennsylvania Avenue without speaking. Colonel Bowman said, "Birdie, I told you not to make a fool of yourself." I replied, "I did not, for as Mr. Lincoln had asked a straightforward question, I answered him truly." Mr. Blair replied, "You have no one to

thank for this but yourself.” I said, “Let us see what the President has written,” and opening the paper, read:—

To Commanders of Forts containing
rebel prisoners:—

Permit the bearer, Miss Neilson, to pass in and make inquiries about her brother; she is an honest girl and can be trusted.

(signed) A. LINCOLN.

I then bid them good morning, but could not resist saying to Mr. Blair, “I have nobody to thank but myself.”

As I remember, this was in March, or early April, 1864. Prior to that, almost from the first of the War, I had worked for



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the Southern prisoners. There was a body of men and women, chiefly of the Presbyterian Church, who called themselves the United States Christian Commission, under the guidance of the Reverend Dr. Boardman, a brother-in-law of General Bowman, who went among the Union wounded in the Hospitals. Through Colonel Bowman, Dr. Boardman had obtained permission from Mr. Lincoln allowing me to go to the Hospitals, where there were Confederate soldiers, to take them what comforts I could.

There had been established Fort Delaware and Chester Hospitals, which were in fact prisons, and I went regularly and carried every comfort I could beg to the Confederate prisoners.

When I found my brother in Camp Chase, Ohio, in July, 1864, I there learned

that the Reverend R. H. Phillip, who was Principal of the Virginia Female Institute where I went to school and was graduated from, and the Reverend James A. Latine, who was Rector of Trinity Church at Staunton, Va., where the girls of the Institute attended, were prisoners at Johnson's Island, Sandusky, Ohio. I was about to be married to your father and was most anxious to have one of them perform the ceremony. I preferred Mr. Phillip, so I went alone and sought an interview with Mr. Lincoln. He received me most kindly, heard my request, looked earnestly at me and placing a hand on my shoulder, said: "My dear young woman, there is no reason on God's earth why I should do a thing like that." This was the last time I saw him.

The pass written by Mr. Lincoln, together with my first set of jewelry, some school medals and a Confederate button and breast pin made from General Beauregard's buttons, together with the star cut from "Stonewall" Jackson's coat after he was shot, were all lost or stolen in February, 1880, when our things were shipped to the Washington Navy Yard. No trace of them has ever been found. The star from "Stonewall" Jackson's shoulder was given me by a prisoner at Chester Hospital to whom I was able to give many comforts.

Nothing beside a death in my family and the surrender of General Lee could give me the sorrow that I experienced on learning that Mr. Lincoln had been assassinated. I realized at once that the South had lost its best friend north of

Mason and Dixon's Line and furthermore would be accused of having wrought the horrible and unnatural crime.

Of a most kind and sympathetic nature and ever firm for justice in all things, Abraham Lincoln was truly a great and good man. Had he lived I will always believe there never would have been a Reconstruction Period, thus sparing the South untold humiliation and despoilation of those possessions the price of war had not already demanded.

I now realize the magnitude of his great task and his patience and wisdom in the face of all the trials and anxieties he suffered, so I say I believe Abraham Lincoln to be the peer of George Washington. I add nothing more save that he might have been a son of my native State—Virginia.





